We're sliding hard and fast through sludge and mud. I scarcely have enough time to dodge trees, rocks, and other debris on the way down. Cassie is clutching my hand for dear life, and it's not making this any easier. I try my damnedest to pull her behind me. If we hit something I'm going to get the blunt of it. At these speeds it's going to hurt; I don't have any doubts.

Then I see the forest break into open air. My hopes for a moment's reprieve are dashed when the rushing of water breaks its way into my hearing. Looks like we've found the river, and I'm not going to risk crashing into it at these speeds. I see a tree ahead of me. I'm going to crash into it and stop ourselves from falling any further. I grit my teeth and prepare for the pain.

There it comes. We hit the tree hard. I feel it. It's not pleasant. And it causes the tree to uproot itself. It's hanging over the edge. The river below us is rushing with the waters from the storm. Lightning flashes in the distance. The first thing I see when it subsides are sharpened rocks barely submerged somewhere down the river. Cassie is clutching the log for dear life. A boon of thunder.

We can't stay here. I look to the hill. There must be something to grab, something to climb back up. There isn't—not close by anyway. The river is only ten feet below us, and I realize that it's our only way out of here. I look as far down the river as I can see. White water splashes against rocks and stones. There's a current and I have no idea if Cassie can swim.

We have nothing to aid us but the clothes on our backs. That's it, isn't it? I take off my jacket and use it as a rope. I tie Cassie to my back. She demands to know what I'm doing, but I don't answer her. It's better if she doesn't know. I stand up on the log. Another bolt of lightning. I actually see a tree fall across the river. We need to do this now. I pick Cassie up and begin jumping on the log. It cracks. She tries to escape my grasp, but I keep jumping. The log slides out of the mud and plunges into the river.

I slip and bang into the log, and in that pain I let go of Cassie. She's still struggling to get away. If I wasn't too busy concentrating on the pain then I could tell her the basic gist of my plan. We're going to ride this log through the river, at least until we can get to some kind of shore. Even if the sides of this river weren't held by a rock wall the banks are way too steep on both sides. So our only choice is to ford the

river.

The crashing rocks and the crashing waves jostles the log. Cassie holds onto me tightly now. Her eyes are tightly closed. I wish mine could be as well but I have to watch the rapids as the push and pull us. I feel every throttle and jolt as the log is battered against the whiter waters. I search desperately for a shore as I bury my fingers into any knot within the tree near my grasp. As the waters tilt the log I swing my weight, keeping us on top.

Piercing jabs of cold water spray against me. The rain pelts down furiously as the storm strikes the forest all around us. At each river bend I look once more for a shore, but the rock walls show no impasse. The wicked and wild winds don't make holding on any easier. Icy spears pelt my body. The only warmth I get is from the explosions of pain in my chest and Cassie digging her nails into my sides.

Sharper rocks start tearing the log to pieces. If it can't take this kind of abuse then we're screwed if it comes apart. Then I see it, a flatter shore. I slide off of the log and take the plunge. I am surrounded by a realm of frigid pain. The autumn waters are less friendly than the the autumn nights. I find my way to the surface and claw my way to shore. The waters rack me furiously and I shake like a dead marionette, but I persevere. My hands start to claw at rocks and gravel. I pull myself out of the waters and crash onto the smoothed stones of the riverbed.

"Are you crazy!?" Cassie asks, slipping out of the jacket. Yes.

"I did what I had to," I say. I get to my feet and put on my now-drenched jacket. "Now we need to get moving and find some shelter. This storm is only going to get worse."

"I'm not going anywhere with you after that."

Lightning flashes.

"Cassie we don't have time for this. We're wet, in a forest, during a lightning storm. I don't have to tell you how much danger we're in right now."

"Less danger than we were in when you made us fall in the river."

Thunder echoes.

"It was the only thing that I could do. If I didn't do that then we'd still be hanging over that edge."

"You could have at least warned me first."

"Look, I'm sorry, can we please get a move on?"

Cassie turns away from me. The rain pelts down, and the storm goes out of control. Winds blow her hair too and fro, playing with each solitary strand. The lightning strikes. We can't keep standing here like idiots. I grab Cassie. She turns to me and I see a familiar face of fear. I mirror the horror as I let go and fall to the gravel below.

"I'm sorry!" Cassie whimpers. "I'll go with you. Please don't hurt me!"

"No—I would never—" I say to myself.

A serpent whispers in my ear. Cassie is listening to you; use this to your advantage. Those emerald eyes. I've seen them before. You don't have time for this, the serpent hisses. Apologize to her later. Get her out of here. Who cares if she's afraid, as long as she's alive. You aren't a monster, and you could never become that monster. You could decapitate her and you'd never be on the level of that monster.

I grab the serpent by the throat and pummel it into the rocks below. The thunder

rolls as I bash its skull in. The serpent whines and pleads for its life. I show no mercy. I crush it in my fists and listen in glee as its bones pop one by one. The rain softens my face and tempers my temper.

"Cassie. I'm never going to hurt you, ever," I manage to say. The fires of fear still burn. "I'm trying to protect you. It's dangerous out here"—lightning strikes once more—"we can talk about this when we get to safety."

"O—okay," Cassie says.

I reach my hand out. She retracts slightly, but then takes it. Together we return to the forest. Together we search for some sort of hiding place from the storm. My eyes are torn away from the bending branches of the trees every now and again to see how Cassie's holding up. Fear still burns, hotly with a bluish flame.

We come across a cave and Cassie dashes ahead of me, desperate to rest. I hesitate at the mouth. Forest caverns seldom go unoccupied, especially in a storm such as this. I tap the light on my watch. It still works, a moment's reprieve. The cave is lit up in an aquamarine glow as I examine the place. Aside from Cassie and myself, it's empty. She's practically balled up, sitting against the cold stone wall. I sit next to her.

"I—I'm sorry," is the first thing I say. I'm not really sorry for what, but it's the only thought that crosses my mind.

"It's okay..." she snivels.

"I keep telling you, no it's not okay. If I hurt you somehow, I want to know."

"No, you didn't hurt me. It's just—"

"Yes?"

"I'm afraid of water, okay."

"You're... afraid of water? Like the rain?"

"No, like the river. I've been terrified of water like that ever since I was really young. I don't know why but every time I've ever tried to go swimming I just lock up and my mind goes blank."

"I'm sorry, if I knew that I would have found some other way."

"No you wouldn't have. You said it yourself, it was the only thing you could have done or else we'd still be hanging over the edge."

"I'm still sorry though."

"I forgive you..."

"Do you really?"

"I—I don't know."

The lightning flashes once more and then we are shrouded in the shadows of the night. I can keep tapping the light on my watch, but it won't tell me more than I already know. I know what she's feeling for me right now. I know what I'm feeling for myself. It's a deadly little emptiness that gives its way to shades of nothingness.